
The Craze

Paul Southern

CHAPTER 1

For as long as anyone could remember, the Craze had been part of their lives. There was no escaping it. It spread like plague through Manchester's twilight streets, infected every house and home from Cheetham Hill to Cheadle Heath. Spread like mutant DNA, each strain more virulent than the last. The Craze. How else to explain the mugging of a wizened Second World War veteran at Belle Vue Dog Track last Saturday night, or the knuckledusting of a frail, old lady coming home from bingo? How else to explain the production line of cars lying strewn and gutted under thick palls of grey smoke? Or the sixteen-year-old beanpole shooters playing Al Capone in the nearest off licence, the junkies lining Stockport Road like the army of the Undead, the green fields of Irish youth, face down, floating in a bog of booze after the twelfth round had ended? Or the boy intruders on crack cocaine, their fat trash whose mothers pimping their white arses to Moss Side Yardies, and the growing gangs of Paki-boy gunrunners from Cheetham Hill and Longsight, holding up their own corner shops? How do you explain it, to Johnny Public, that they'd more chance of getting their car pinched (whether they're in it or not), their face smashed, and their house ransacked, than in any city on the Eastern seaboard? What do you tell them?

You tell them the truth.

Beneath their feet, the compressed magma of social deprivation churns daily, breaks out on to the surface with volcanic force and increasing regularity. The fault-lines are shifting, one area lifted by council regeneration, another sinking again into poverty and crime as council overspill pours into the heathen breaches. Gang warfare erupts along the earthquake zones, internecine feuds fuelled by greed and pathological insecurity. One day, one fine June day, the whole lid will come off and Manchester will burn in fires hotter than the Kalahari bush.

The Craze. Jamie Farrell had known it all his life. Had grown up with it. As had Darren Finch next door, who'd shot the eyeballs out of his dog, then tried it on a school friend. Or poor Sandy Sloane over the way, whose legs were broken by a black BMW one Friday night. Her husband Gandhi, banged up good following another failed armed robbery, discovered she was sleeping with everyone at his old boozier and got her steamrolled. Broke both her legs. Didn't stop her, though. Sandy did most of her best work on her back.

For Jamie it began when he was ten. He pinched the purse of some old Paki on Hamilton Road, punched her as she struggled, and flew off into the badlands of the Anson Estate. He'd crossed the line. And had been vaulting it ever since. But with his teens ending, the line was disappearing from view. The Craze was killing him. And it was getting worse.

Night on Northmoor Road, the hard boys were spilling out on to the streets. He was with Billy Whizz, intravenous on cocaine, sitting in a stolen Astra. Life could not have been worse. The moon hung high in the pale beyond. Billy egged him on: Drive. So he drove. Faster. And faster. Faster towards Kirkmanshulme Lane, over ramps that threatened to plough the car into the hereafter. What the fuck point was there in having them when the car you were wrecking wasn't even your own, and the thrill of shaft and axle breaking beneath you was as near to love as you were ever likely to get?

Bang. The car soared like an angel into the night sky. Bang. Over ramp into ruin. Headed straight for the junction of Stanley Grove. And the blinking red eye. Billy screamed, early blew his head off, told him to run it, run it, run through the fucking thing. Jamie put his foot through the floor and closed his eyes. Horns blared and the screech of wheels concussed the air. Fucking hell. They were through. Through with everything. He'd successfully failed his emergency stop. And all with Billy Whizz beside him.

The Craze was born. Beautiful and simple. Better than any drug. Trying to capture that moment when your whole life lay suspended over the world, when the rope was hung out for you, waiting for you to slip your head in, but you tied the knot all the same. A moment when consequences receded so far away that nothing on God's, or anyone else's, earth mattered at all. Jumping that red light was beautiful. Death and the brake pedal. It was for Jamie the beginning and ending of everything. As near to anything as he'd ever get. Two had died already. A pile-up in Denton, their faces up in lights on Granada News. What a way to go. The reporter said it was a tragedy for the families. Jamie knew the families. It wasn't. They were shit-bags. No-one gave a fuck about them. Still, he was envious. They'd died in fire and glory. And he was still here. There was only one way to beat them. Kingsway. Not even Billy Whizz had managed that.

Kingsway was four long miles of joy-riding heaven, a dual carriageway stretching from West Point in the north to Didsbury in the south. The ultimate challenge. Junctions every four hundred yards, six sets of lights. Six ways to kill yourself. On a

hot Manchester night you could top a hundred down there. If you dared. Terence. Billy. None had got as far as Fog Lane. Something always got in the way. A pedestrian staggering across the dual carriageway with armalite pizzas from Signori's, a tyre bursting, jack-knifing them into the reservation, or two fat slags pissing in a gutter. They should have rammed their fucking fat arses.

Kingsway was the big one. Jamie'd get it one day. Or one day it'd get him.